



High Lights, Shadings, and Shadows

LACMA,
PICTORIALISM,
AND THE
INTERNATIONAL
SALONS OF
PHOTOGRAPHY

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

July 9–August 10, 1998

DURING THE EARLY PART OF THIS CENTURY

the cultural climate of Los Angeles allowed for the acceptance of a greater diversity of artistic expression than was possible in cities where cultural hierarchies were already firmly rooted. Photography in particular benefited from this early lack of hierarchic distinctions. Unlike the development of an acceptance of photography as art in other cities, in Los Angeles the city, its cultural institutions, and the medium came of age together, aiding each other's growth. The burgeoning metropolis provided a rich visual environment as well as ready acknowledgment for the creative use of this evolving technology, while the medium helped to spur economic and cultural advances in the rapidly growing city.

LACMA as we know it today is scarcely thirty-three years old. Its history, however, began long before it was established as an independent entity. Prior to 1965 it was part of a triumvirate of institutions that had been shackled to one another politically. The Los Angeles Museum of History, Science, and Art officially opened its doors to visitors on November 6, 1913. The new museum was founded after an eleven-year ordeal marked by a series of tenuous alliances, contentious legal maneuvering, and masterful social and political arm twisting. The negotiations for the site alone led to a flurry of litigation, which culminated in 1908 with a State Supreme Court ruling clearing the way for the condemnation of what was then known as Agricultural Park and its ultimate redevelopment as modern-day Exposition Park.

Nearly two years later the county board of supervisors agreed to erect and partially fund a museum to be administered jointly by a group of organizations that included the Southern California Academy of Sciences, the Southern Division of the Cooper Ornithological Club, the Historical Society of Southern California, and the Los Angeles Fine Arts League.

Beginning with no collection of its own, the art component of the museum was given over to selections from local private collections, traveling exhibitions from other institutions, and showcases for the work of local artists and art associations. Photography was first shown in the museum when Edward Weston (1886–1958) organized the photographic component of a survey exhibition of local “applied arts” in 1916. Weston, one of the most respected photographers in the region, worked out of his studio in Glendale (then known as Tropic), consistently participated in local camera clubs, and exhibited in local venues. Two years later the museum hosted the first of a series of photography exhibitions organized by the local pictorialist group. Images acquired from these exhibitions form the nucleus of LACMA’s present permanent collection.



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PICTORIALISM, until recently, has commonly been denigrated as an attempt by its practitioners to legitimize photography as art and hence themselves as artists. Visually the pictorial aesthetic has been narrowly defined by images in which a soft-focus technique provides a hazy, shimmering quality; images that through hand-manipulation of the negative or of the final print approximated a drawing or etching; images printed on toned and textured paper which recall pastel or lithographic techniques; or images that rely on pastoral or genre subjects and compositions that closely reflect nineteenth-century Romantic traditions in the other visual arts.

It is tempting to assume the pictorialists comprised a homogeneous membership that stemmed from a rigid, commonly held definition of what constituted “art photography” similar in organization to that of the Linked Ring in London, Alfred Stieglitz’s Photo-Secession, or later, the Group f/64 in California. Each individual pictorialist group could be said

to have been either conservative or expansive in its view of the medium. On the whole, however, members of pictorialist clubs were surprisingly diverse in the types of pictures they took and increasingly tolerant of evolving approaches to photography. New—notably modernist—techniques, ideas, and imagery were readily assimilated into an expanding repertoire and



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aesthetic. Pictorialist photographers employed a broad range of photographic processes, printing techniques, and formats matched by a diversity of subject matter. They explored themes and techniques of abstraction and distortion that are rarely associated with a strictly pictorialist sensibility. Common to all was the simple and frequently asserted proposition that photography was a fine art.

The Camera Pictorialists of Los Angeles was the local manifestation of an international trend that began in the late nineteenth century and saw the formation of camera clubs in virtually every major population center. The Los Angeles group was modeled after the Pictorial Photographers of America, organized by Clarence H. White (1871–1925) in 1916, and was heir to a regional tradition that had begun at the turn of the century. The first Los Angeles Camera Club was formally incorporated on May 1, 1900, and stayed active, surviving a series of permutations and reorganizations, for years. Each of the newly defined groups in its turn provided vigorous support for the city's burgeoning ranks of professional and amateur photographers. In what was a final factional splintering, the Los Angeles Camera Club was disbanded



in 1915, and a new photographic organization was formed: the Camera Pictorialists of Los Angeles. The new club's stated purpose was to "assist and stimulate art through demonstrating the lens' artistic possibilities and to assist the members of the club in their pictorial work by supplying the means of comparing their efforts with those of the recognized photographers of America."

Despite their geographic isolation from the modernist photographic discourse taking place in New York and Europe, the members of the Camera Pictorialists of Los Angeles held very early to a decidedly expansive view of the medium and its art-making potential. This may be due to the group's relatively



late incorporation or the availability and dissemination of publications such as Stieglitz's *Camera Work*; perhaps their very isolation provided them greater freedom. Undoubtedly a contributing factor was the presence of Weston, Karl Struss (1886–1981), and Louis Fleckenstein (1866–1943) among the early members of the organization. Each exerted a strong influence on the aesthetic philosophy and direction of the group. Weston's influence can be said to have been one of example: a pictorialist in his early career, he moved increasingly toward a modernist approach and until the late 1920s regularly exhibited his work in Los Angeles. Struss, not only a member of Stieglitz's Photo-Secession but later a founder of the Pictorial Photographers of America, provided a crucial link to the photographic avant-garde. Coming to Los Angeles to work in the film industry, Struss was the corecipient of the first Academy Award for cinematography (1929). Fleckenstein's work was consistently selected for exhibition in salons held in Europe and the United States, and he was largely responsible for organizing the Salon Club of America. After moving to Los Angeles, he organized, along with Weston, the local Camera Pictorialists group. His reputation and contacts ensured that the new organization would attract international attention and participation.

THE INTERNATIONAL SALONS OF PHOTOGRAPHY

were held annually at the Los Angeles Museum of History, Science, and Art from 1918 through 1947. While hosted at the museum, the salons were organized under the auspices of the Camera Pictorialists of Los Angeles and were similar to juried exhibitions of photography that were common in Berlin, Chicago, London, New York, and Paris. Purchases made by the museum from these exhibitions were the first accessions of photography to enter the permanent collection.

Jurors for the Los Angeles salon routinely made their selections from more than 2,000 entries in order to present between 150 and 250 prints in the exhibition. Reflecting their expansive approach to photography, the members of the Camera Pictorialists who served as jurors for the exhibition consistently included the widest range of imagery and processes in their exhibitions. Rich carbon and platinum prints shared wall space with glossy gelatin-silver prints; Romantic snowscapes and seascapes were hung alongside images celebrating industry and technology; and dreamlike pastorals were juxtaposed with the sharpest still-life studies.

Organizers of the salons boasted submissions from a world-wide array of artists. It was common to see work by American artists hanging alongside work from Australia, Egypt, the Soviet Union, Spain, and Sweden. As a result, the yearly International Salon of Photography became one of the highlights of the city's cultural landscape and earned a global reputation, along with the Pittsburgh Salon of National Photographic Art, as one of the two most prestigious and long-lived salons in the country.

TEXT BY TIM B. WRIDE, ASSOCIATE CURATOR

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Additional Reading

Peterson, Christian A. *After the Photo-Secession: American Pictorial Photography, 1910–1955*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997.

Wilson, Michael G., and Dennis Reed. *California Pictorialism: Photographs 1900–1940*. Exh. cat. Malibu and San Marino: J. Paul Getty Museum and Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, 1994.

Cover

Imogen Cunningham
(United States, 1893–1976)
Blue Bird, 1939
Gelatin-silver print
14 x 10 1/2 in. (35.6 x 27.6 cm)
Los Angeles County Fund, 30.45.7

1

Henri Berresenbrugge
(Holland, 1873–1959)
Portrait, 1924
Gum bichromate print
15 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (39.1 x 29.7 cm)
Los Angeles County Fund, 36.25.5

2

M. Curt Schmidt
(Germany, active 1920–30s)
Alle Brücke (Old bridge), c. 1923
Bromide transfer print
6 1/2 x 8 in. (15.9 x 20.3 cm)
Los Angeles County Fund, 23.20.14

3

Forman Hanna
(United States, 1881–1950)
Winter, c. 1923
Gelatin-silver bromide print
9 7/8 x 11 1/2 in. (24.1 x 29.2 cm)
Los Angeles County Fund, 23.20.9

4

William Rittase
(United States, 1887–1978)
So Thin Is New York, c. 1928
Gelatin-silver bromide print
11 3/8 x 9 3/8 in. (29.5 x 24.2 cm)
Los Angeles County Fund, 28.23.1

5

Kaye Shimojima
(Japan, active United States 1920s)
Edge of Pond, c. 1928
Toned gelatin-silver bromide print
13 1/2 x 10 1/2 in. (34.2 x 26.7 cm)
Los Angeles County Fund, 28.24.2